

BLENDED LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses blended learning as a widely adopted instructional approach in higher education, particularly for initial and continuing education. Despite its global relevance, there is limited implementation between different international regions, particularly involving developing countries. The focus is on exploring blended learning courses for international teacher professional development. The paper outlines theoretical and operational principles based on a socio-constructivist approach, presenting a blended design within an international project. It emphasizes the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth in blended learning environments.

KEYWORDS: Blended Learning, Collaboration, International Professional Learning, Design, Teacher, Regional Differences,

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade Blended Learning (BL) becomes one of the wider used instructional approaches proposed by higher education for initial and continuing training, with prominent international conference dedicated to this topic (like “the Blended & Personalized Learning Conference” and the “International Association for Blended Learning Conference”). BL is particularly interesting for features like flexibility, effectiveness, cost reduction, allowing an optimization of resources by the participant and the training institute and making possible a redesign of a traditional course. Despite the widespread of BL in higher education, few are the blended learning course proposed in international settings or addressed to international issues (Halverson, Graham, Spring & Drysdale, 2012). Also, BL in international collaboration with specific attention to the diversity of the cultures and group is still scarce, especially for teacher professional learning.

Keeping in mind the need to design innovative training skills in order to convey knowledge and skills, the purpose of this paper is to explore the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth in blended learning. Below, BL is analysed considering an international perspective and specifically related to teachers professional learning. Then, theoretical approaches and strategies to design international blended learning are examined in a socio-constructivist approach.

METHODS

Blended Learning is gaining institutional-wide support in formal education. BL enhance the potential benefits of both face-to-face and online approaches for participants and educators, in an effective and flexible communication and collaboration adapted for adult education (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2014). Indeed, here, BL is understood as the optimal combination of learning and online presence, enhancing the potential benefits of both approaches (Graham, Allen, & Ure, 2003). Bonk and Graham (2006) propose four dimensions as being able to synthesise and represent the possible structure of BL: space, time, the characteristics of the media, and human

characteristics. So the strength of BL lies in the rethinking of the teaching model to adapt them to the specific context of use (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004)

It emphasizes a participant-centred perspective, facilitates access to continuing education for new audiences and a better use of educational resources. In this way, it helping to rethink modes of teaching and learning, introducing new script, plan and organizing of lessons, taking into account the educational context. The flexible use of ICT in BL offer participants new opportunities to develop a personal vision of pedagogy that facilitate the use of the technology too. Also, the recent review of the literature shows evidence that BL appears to facilitate learner empowerment more than either face-to-face or fully online courses, with a greater sense of succeeding (Owston, 2018).

In educational settings, Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) argue that the reasons why educators, instructors, trainers, and students prefer BL to other formats may be educational. That is to say, it offers pedagogical wealth; direct access to information; the possibility of more varied social interactions; customisation, flexibility, and accountability; and the optimal relationship between costs and results. The differentiation of teaching methods leads to the personalisation of the educational intervention, playing on the pleasure of technology and the blending of the formal and informal. Scholars also argue that BL is particularly effective at encouraging the development of critical and reflective thinking, relying on the ability of the participants to engage in self-regulated learning. In professional settings, BL is also sufficiently flexible and efficient to adapt to different working situations.

Despite this variety of potential described above, the adoption of BL for international training is still in the starting phase, as presented in the following section.

Yet, the potential of BL in developing countries is not yet explored. BL could be an interesting choice to be supported in developing countries, looking for flexible and effective solutions to adapt in a challenging context with limited technology solutions. Indeed, the BL is based on a no-expensive technical infrastructure, like a free online learning environment such a Moodle, already rich in online tutorials in different languages and well adapted for mobile.

Connections and research between regions supported by technology could contribute share international issues and program for complementary solutions and contributions. International exchange and discussions supported by technology have rich implications for teachers professional learning, that we will examine in the next paragraph.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The project “Blended Learning Training for Teachers educators” (in the following indicated with the acronym “BLTeae”) – for more info <http://blteae.eu/> - led by Aix-Marseille University (France) is supported by the European Capacity Building Program. This European program has the aim to foster and increase trans-national cooperation projects between higher education institutions, addressing challenges and cross-cultural awareness. The project BLTeae is oriented to involve European countries (France, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia) and Asian countries (Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan) in a collaborative community capable to reflect on teaching trainers’ practices. It responds to the common European and Asiatic issue to improve and revise teacher training programs. Indeed, improving the quality of teacher teaching effectiveness is one important school-related factors in student achievement in different regions (OECD, 2014). The project BLTeae is articulated in three years, with some main activities (for a summary, see Table 1):

- In the first year an initial questionnaire is conceived and submitted to all the community to know need and skills of teacher educators. In the same time, all the institutions are involved in co-

developing content for a training course organized with 20 online modular courses and two face-to-face training (one in Bangladesh and the second in Pakistan);

- In the second and current year, all the members are involved in video sharing about teaching practices (related with the modules) and online community discussion on the teachers' practices;
- In the third year, the main activity is the sharing of best practices about teacher educators' practices to build a common reference curriculum for teachers' educators.



Table 1. Three-years activities in the BLTeae project

The blended learning is proposed considering the three macro level: 'personal', 'peer' and 'group'. Indeed, adopting a socio-constructivist perspective, learning derived from a complex interaction with other people who feel connected by belonging to a community. Also, an active participation in a learning community brings the sharing of experiences and meaning, making a possible new form of collaboration and active knowledge building process, with discussion, sharing, negotiation and integration of ideas.

The personal dimension of teacher-educators in the project is supported by the use of space (like e-portfolio) for individual reflection. Also, an online tutor guides the individual reflections. The peers (teachers-educators from all the institutions involved in the project) share in the community what they have learned by the online resources, and re-evaluate these experiences to see them in new ways that might suggest new practices. In particular, the role of the peers is active in the sharing of digital video about their teacher practices (Santagata & Angelici 2010). Indirectly, this online activity could have an impact on their local teaching class and in the educational community. Learning innovative practices, the embedded use of ITC in the training course and continue discussing knowledge and personal experiences on common space could strength effective teaching.

CONCLUSION

The paper goes in the direction to explore the potential for global collaboration and cooperative growth about BL. Connections and research between regions could contribute share international issues and program for complementary solutions and contributions. This prospective is used for

discuss about teachers professional developing. In fact, we consider that the development of a complex professionalism such as that of the teachings can take advantage of an international networking, which today the technologies make possible but it not yet full proposed by higher institutions. The design of innovative learning courses, supported by technology, is strategic for the today international globalization. The BL based on international collaborative learning can be particularly useful in designing interventions, with a scenario that includes social interaction; open and complex issues requiring investigation and active engagement; shared knowledge objects and collective efforts to advance knowledge.

The analysis of a BL course can support the tutor and lecturer in educational monitoring and in planning issues and conceptual changes during the learning process. A method of data collection in the BL context is “blended ethnography”. It is a form of ethnography that integrates techniques of traditional face-to-face research with those of virtual ethnography, conducting an in-depth study of a blended community (Stringer et al., 1997). The adoption of BL is certainly not easy to implement and does not always guarantee satisfactory results, considering the lack of shared knowledge of the procedures and proper information for implementing it. Consequently, it is important to train tutors and teachers properly, especially regarding the integration of technology in the pedagogy.

Finally, if well designed, BL could be a space within which to improve professional competence and transversal skills, considering that learners have to deal with new working contexts in their personal and professional lives. Thus, the design of a BL course could help to support a new generation of international teachers, more connected beyond national borders.

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